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SUBJECT: THE HINES WARD EFFECT: KOREA QUESTIONS ITS
NATIONAL IDENTITY

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: When Hines Ward, a half-Korean, half-African-American pro football player, visited Korea recently, the event caused Koreans to examine their own prejudices against Koreans of mixed-race heritage. Hines Ward became a media darling, while the average mixed-race Korean suffers bigotry, poor education rates, high unemployment, and are not even allowed to join the military, despite compulsory military service for all other males. The "Hines Ward effect" also impacted the ROKG, which introduced anti-discrimination legislation during his visit and promised to revise textbooks by 2009. As the number of mixed-race Koreans and other foreigners continues to rise in Korea, the ROKG and others will need to actively contend with this issue. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Although some of Korea's hottest celebrities are mixed-race, Hines Ward is the first half-Korean, half-African American star to be embraced by the Korean public (the other celebrities are half-Caucasian). When the Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback/most valuable player (MVP) of the 2006 Super Bowl visited Korea in April 2006, corporations practically tripped over themselves to offer him free products and endorsement deals. The star treatment Ward received was in stark contrast, however, to the way average mixed-raced people are treated in Korea. As such, Ward's visit, especially the caustic criticism from his accompanying Korean mother, caused many Koreans to confront how they treat mixed-race people, who were until recently mostly the children of American soldier fathers and Korean mothers.

A BRIEF ETHNIC HISTORY

¶3. (U) Historically, Korea preferred to keep to itself, hence the term Hermit Kingdom. But it was not always able to fend off neighbors with colonial designs, such as Japan. Thus, "pure blood" Korean ethnicity became a source of national pride. In textbooks, Korean children are taught the myth of Dan-gun, the leader of the "son of heaven" tribe, which alludes to Korean people's celestial origins.

¶4. (U) Korea has remained virtually homogenous ethnically. The only sizable non-Korean ethnic group is the Chinese people, who first immigrated from Shandong in the late 19th century. There are about 20,000 Chinese-Koreans, and they typically remain distinct: they tend not to intermarry with Koreans and retain their native language. In fact, many remain citizens of China or Taiwan, since Korean law endows citizenship per the father's nationality.

¶5. (U) Mixed-race children born during the Korean War from unions between American soldiers and Korean women were the first obviously mixed-race Koreans. These children were discriminated against not only because they weren't "pure-blooded" Koreans, but also because there was a perception that the Korean mothers were prostitutes (or at least very strange to choose such a union). Those who were half African-American received the harshest treatment, as Koreans tended to discriminate against those whose skin was darker than theirs.

TREATMENT OF MIXED-RACED KOREANS

¶6. (U) For biracial children, life in Korea is bleak. Forty percent of mixed-raced Koreans have attempted suicide, says the state-run National Human Rights Commission. According to the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports mixed-race children in Korea, a sizable number of mixed-race children do not even make it past elementary school because of discrimination. Between 1964 and 2002, 17.5 percent of mixed-race children failed to complete middle school, versus 1.1 percent of full-blooded Korean children. Twenty-two percent of mixed-race people are unemployed, compared to the national rate in June 2006 of 3.4 percent.

¶7. (U) But when Hines Ward came to Korea, Koreans seemed to ignore his African-American heritage and embraced him as a Korean hero. Before then, he received no media attention. A JoongAng Daily article from September 2005 claims that no article had been written on Ward up to that point. The attention that was showered upon Ward during his April 2006 visit provoked an array of emotions among Koreans: sorrow, anger, shame, soul-searching, and confusion among mixed-race Koreans, who had never seen a half African-American person so adored. Hines Ward's mother, Kim Young-hee, did not hold back criticizing the way she and Hines were treated when they were in Korea, describing how they were spat upon during a 1998 visit. She said they would never have had the opportunity to succeed if they remained in Korea. (NOTE: They moved to the United States when Ward was one year old. END NOTE.)

NEW LEGISLATION

¶8. (U) Hines Ward's story even inspired politicians to enact anti-discrimination laws. Representative Kim Choong-hwan (GNP), told poloff he was "deeply impressed" by the difficulties that Ward's mother experienced. Kim introduced an anti-discrimination bill to the National Assembly in April 2006 that, among other things, proposes to establish the Center for Helping Mixed Blood Families (under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family); requires schools to carry out education plans for mixed-race children; and empowers governments and local governing bodies to provide financial aid as necessary. Kim will bring a revised version of the bill to the National Assembly in September 2006, and he expects wide support from representatives and Koreans in general.

¶9. (U) The ROKG is also making some rhetorical changes. The Blue House and the Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development said they will revise textbooks by 2009 to include multiracial and multicultural aspects of Korea. (NOTE: Currently, textbooks refer to Korea as an ethnically homogenous society. END NOTE.) The ROKG will also use the term "people of international marriages" instead of "mixed blood" in all government documents.

¶10. (U) Recently, the ROKG has made other changes that give more rights to non-"pure blood" Koreans. In 2005, the ROKG revised voting laws so that foreign residents who have lived in Korea for at least three years could vote in local elections, but not presidential or parliamentary elections. Plus, until earlier this year, mixed-race males were not

allowed to serve in the military, which meant they could not participate in what is commonly viewed as a rite of passage. Mixed-race men are now allowed to volunteer, but only a few have come forward.

¶11. (U) There are critics to the ROKG's changes, ranging from North Korea, who ridiculed the ROKG's reference to Korea as a multiracial society, to academics, to average citizens. There is a general belief that politicians were taking advantage of the issue du jour, and that once the dust settled, any changes that were made won't have a true or lasting impact. A Korea Herald journalist wryly noted that, when doing research on multiracialism in Korea, there was media buzz around the Ward visit that lasted exactly one month, but now there is nothing.

THE AMERICANIZATION OF KOREA?

¶12. (U) By 2020, the Pearl S. Buck foundation estimates there will be 70,000 mixed-race Koreans. In addition, there are currently 800,000 foreigners in Korea, many of whom are workers. As more and more provincial Koreans move to the cities, farmers and fisherman are "importing" wives from other countries, particularly South-east Asia. The products of those unions make up the majority mixed-race people in Korea. (NOTE: There are 30,000 Korean and South-east Asian mixed-race people, compared to 5,000 born to Korean mothers and American fathers. END NOTE.) Many Koreans seem to accept that globalization is inevitable for Korea. Although the ROKG is making changes, the problems associated with prejudice against mixed-race people or other foreigners will continue to be an issue that it will be faced with for a long time to come.

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